



# Autism Society of Michigan

providing hope ~ making human connections ~ changing lives

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Health Policy Committee  
Rep. Kathy Angerer, Chair  
124 North Capitol  
P.O. Box 30014  
Lansing, MI 48909-7514

December 13, 2007

Dear Representative Angerer and Committee Members:

Autism is a complex developmental disability that typically appears during the first three years of life and is the result of a neurological disorder that affects the normal functioning of the brain, impacting development in the areas of social interaction and communication skills. Both children and adults with autism typically show difficulties in verbal and non-verbal communication, social interactions, and leisure or play activities. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Autism affects an estimated 1 in 150 births. Roughly translated, this means as many as 1.5 million Americans today are believed to have some form of autism. And this number is on the rise.

Autism is now an urgent public health crisis. It is the fastest-growing serious childhood disability in the United States and the number of students in Michigan known to have autism has more than doubled over the past 5 years from 5,671 in 2001 to 11,366 in 2006. We know there are thousands of individuals who are not identified, have gone undiagnosed or are not affected by the disorder enough to qualify for special education services. Unfortunately, Michigan does not have an accurate number of adults with autism residing in the state. However, we do know the Michigan Developmental Disabilities Council estimates there are at least 182,000 individuals with development disabilities, many of which do have autism, living in the state of Michigan. Because of the high incidence rate of Autism Spectrum Disorder in Michigan, the fifth highest in the country, we feel that there is also a greater need to educate our residents that autism affects every socioeconomic, ethnic and geographic population and there is no known cause, no known cure, and no known way of preventing autism.

The Autism Society of Michigan is however cognizant that some of the often severe symptoms of autism can be ameliorated. Provided the appropriate intervention, we believe that every individual with autism can benefit and their quality of life be enhanced. Many individuals can achieve remarkable results, and many will be able to lead fully independent lives. These interventions are time-consuming, require skilled therapists and teachers, and must be individualized, flexible and constantly monitored and modified. This is not without extensive financial investment and currently the burden of evaluating and providing for these interventions falls almost entirely on parents who are often just trying to make it through the day meeting the often challenging needs of their loved one with autism.



The mission of the Autism Society of Michigan (ASM) is to assure full participation and self-determination in every aspect of life for each individual. We will realize this vision by opening avenues of self-advocacy and advocating on behalf of others in a way that values equity, respect, dignity and diversity in all communities.

Additionally Michigan parents who are aware of effective interventions will only rarely have support outside their families to obtain what is needed for their loved ones. In Michigan health insurance providers often exclude, or severely limit coverage for autism based solely on the disability. Even though it is known autism can be reliably diagnosed and challenging symptoms reduced, people too often do not obtain appropriate health care services, even when they have “good” insurance. Routinely arbitrary and discriminatory insurance practices invoke barriers to much needed medical and behavioral health services. Such barriers, which take the form of denied services, stricter limits on treatment duration, and much higher out-of-pocket costs for medical and behavioral health care than for other medical care, are commonplace in this state. Lack of access to these interventions and services takes a severe toll – in accessing appropriate educational services, custody relinquishment, institutionalization, unemployment, and other quality of life issues. Autism treatment coverage is fair, affordable, and will reduce the long-term costs of services and supports to individuals with autism across their lifespan.

More than 25 other states, in recent years have addressed the needs of the autism community by providing individuals with autism and their families’ assistance through mandated insurance coverage to provide necessary evaluations, interventions, therapies and behavioral methodologies. We believe this is both the morally and ethically sound best practice to be implemented in the state of Michigan to ensure that all individuals with autism will be provided an appropriate quality of care that should be an entitlement as it is any other individual in the state.

We would also like to request that within consideration of HB 5526 & HB 5528, that the funds raised initially be allotted to form a temporary statewide Autism Task Force to address areas of concern for all individuals living with autism in the state. This Task Force, much like others formed in states such as California, Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania, will then be able to identify and target what will be need to be accomplished to meet the ever increasing needs of the autism community within education, community living, transportation, and employment options. It would then be our hope that a legislative commission will be formed, as has been in many other states, to provide appropriations to fulfill the Task Force’s final summary as to the direction our state needs to move to enhance the lives of all individuals with autism.

On behalf of the 1,000+ members of the Autism Society of Michigan, and their families, we urge your immediate attention to these issues. We ask for your support on the passage of HB 5527 & HB 5529 with modified language. We suggest that you broaden the definition of behavioral interventions by removing the language “*Applied Behavioral Analysis and Lovass Behavioral Therapy*” and replacing it with, “*Behavioral Interventions*”, to ensure individuals and families will have access to a variety of therapeutic interventions, thereby preventing the possibility of insurance companies limiting appropriate service options.

We would also like to express our appreciation to you Representative Angerer and Representative Richard Ball for taking the time to address appropriate insurance coverage for all individuals with autism as well as establishing a check off consideration for tax payers to support the autism community. We look forward to working with you on these very important issues.

Sincerely,

Kimberly Maddox-Reihl  
Executive Director  
Autism Society of Michigan